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ABSTRACT

The Caldecott Awards are presented annually for the most distinguished American picture book(s) published for children. Invariably these books are well written and illustrated and frequently touch an inner core. Here are some of the messages the Caldecott winners can pass along: a book should be a pleasure to hear; a book should help a child absorb the words, rhythms, and tones of the language that surrounds him or her; a book should evoke emotional appeal; and a book should create a strong visual image. Personalized children's literature (where details about the child are integrated into the text) have added potential. These writings can motivate even the most reluctant reader/listener, build his or her self esteem, and strengthen a sense of identity. The one caveat to consider is the literary standard of the piece: if the piece has merit, the fact that it is also personalized can be a real bonus. Contains annotated citations for 6 books. (NKA)

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Selecting Quality Literature for Your Child:

Lessons From the Caldecott Award Winners

By Lois W. Stern

The coveted Caldecott Awards are presented annually for the most distinguished American picture book(s) for children published in the United States. Although the Caldecott winners are hardly the only outstanding children's books published each year, they do provide us with insight into what constitutes quality children's literature. Invariably these books are well written and illustrated, frequently touching an inner core. Here are some of the messages the Caldecott winners can pass along to us.

A book should be a pleasure to hear.

When you speak to your child with carefully chosen words blended into well formed sentences, you are giving her a gift - the gift of a wonderful model of oral language. It is equally important that when you have an opportunity to read to your child, the book offers her that same gifted model. See how skillfully time, place, background information and curious anticipation are presented in this one introductory sentence from *Mirette on the High Wire* by Emily Arnold McCully.

One hundred years ago in Paris, when theatres and music halls drew traveling players from all over the world, the best place to stay was at the widow Gateau's, a boarding house on English Street.

A book should help your child absorb the words, rhythms and tones of the language that surround him, as surely as the air he breathes.

So do nourish him with books filled with interesting words, rhythmic beats and linguistically pleasing sentences. By doing so you will be guiding him toward literary environments as pure as the mountain air. (For just as the quality of your child's physical environment impacts upon his health, the quality of his linguistic surroundings impact upon his language development.) In the book *When I Was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant, the continual repetition of those title words, gives the text a mesmerizing, rhythmic flow. The result is near poetry.

When I was young in the mountains, Grandfather came home in the evening covered with the black dust of the coal mine. Only his lips were clean, and he used them to kiss the top of my head.

A book should evoke emotional appeal.

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Good books evoke a range of feelings: identification, joy, curiosity, comfort, motivation, encouragement, self-esteem, that aa-ha feeling of heightened sensitivity or awareness. It is no more realistic to expect every book to evoke such feelings in your child than it is to expect each of your conversations to arouse her psyche. But surely some of your shared conversations and books will have such an impact.

Sams, Bangs and Moonshine by Evelyn Ness is one such example of a book waiting to touch the soul. The protagonist is introduced at the beginning of the story as a most believable character, heart warming despite her flaws.

On a small island, near a large harbor, there once lived a fisherman's little daughter (named Samantha, but always called Sam), who had the reckless habit of lying. Not even the sailors home from the sea could tell stranger stories than Sam.

Most children readily identify with Sam, whose lies or *'moonshine'* caused near calamity in this story. Who amongst us has never been caught in a fib? (though probably not as life threatening as Sam's!) This story, without being a bit preachy, has the power to heighten your child's consciousness to the inherent dangers of lies. While identifying with Sam, she will be likely to get the message that she, too, can be loved - even when her behavior is less than lovable.

A book should create a strong visual image.

An inviting cover entices its audience but the pictures within do the real work of the book. They should be large and appealing, formed by artistic strokes executed with the same care and consideration as the words of the text, with a good match between the tone set by the words and illustrations. Maurice Sendak did this so perfectly in *Where the Wild Things Are*. The sharp clawed, pointy toothed, bulging eyed monsters are hardly beautiful to behold! But children adore them, perhaps because they match the ugliness of Max's mood so perfectly. Listen to the following quote from Mr. Sendak's book; then close your eyes and try to visualize his beasts.

And when he came to the place where the wild things are, they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said "BE STILL!"

Contrast the illustrations of *The Wild Things* with the beauty of those in Allen Say's book, *Grandfather's Journey*. Magnificent, full size paintings dominate the pages of this book. The strength and beauty of each of these illustrations conveys the depth of Mr. Say's emotional attachment to each of his homelands.

A Few Words About Personalized Children's Literature

Personalized writings (where details about the child are integrated into the text), have wonderful added potential. These writing can motivate even the most reluctant reader/listener, build his self-esteem and strengthen his sense of identity. The one caveat

to consider is the literary standards of the piece. Listen for the rhythm and flow of its language, the richness of the vocabulary, the quality of the linguistic model. Examine its visual and emotional appeal. If you agree that the piece has merit, the fact that it is also personalized can be a real bonus. If the personalization is largely a gimmick which presents a poor linguistic model, it might be best to invest in a good quality generic book instead.

Keep in mind that the quality of your child's linguistic surroundings impact upon her language development as surely as the quality of his physical environment impacts upon her health. So do read to your child often, enjoy the stories you share and guide him toward quality books for at least a part of her literary diet!

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by Lois W. Stern

Books cited:

McCully, Emily Arnold, *Mirette on the High Wire*, [G.P.Putnam's Sons (division of G.P. Putnam & Grosset) 1992.]

Synopsis: When a new guest arrives at the widow's boarding house, her daughter begs this mysterious stranger to teach her how to cross the courtyard on air. Mirette is an outstanding student, but little does she realize that she is also a fine teacher. For it is her undaunted determination which helps this once master wire-walker regain his courage.

Ness, Evelyn, *Sams, Bangs and Moonshine* [Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966.]

Synopsis: Trouble begins when Sam creates a pet kangaroo with her runaway imagination (moonshine). She sends her best friend off into the harbor to find this imaginary creature. A sudden storm brings near disaster to both her friend and Bangs, the cat. Sam learns how painful it can be to tell a lie and that there's a way to separate moonshine from the truth. Along the way she also discovers that people are ready to forgive.

Rylant, Cynthia ,*When I Was Young in the Mountains* , [E.P.Dutton (division of Penguin Books) 1982.]

Synopsis: The simple joys of childhood from a bygone time and place: sitting down at grandmother's table spread with hot cornbread and fried okra, heating freshly pumped well water to fill round tin tubs for bathing, celebrating baptisms at the dark fishing hole, are poignantly recalled in this book. Its words and tone will enrich your child's understanding of a different way of life while reinforcing a feeling of the universality of family love. A sense of warmth and security gained from caring familial relationships pervades the story and illustrations.

Say, Allen, *Grandfather's Journey* [Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.]

Synopsis: We share in these unique cross cultural experiences through the beauty of the pictured landscapes and text of poignant memories, reflecting Mr. Say's love for both his homelands: Japan and the United States. By occasionally returning to the country he has left behind, he stills the longing in his heart and satisfies his dual allegiance. This is a book to be enjoyed on many levels.

Sendak, Maurice, *Where the Wild Things Are* [Harper Row Publishers, 1963, 1984.]

Synopsis: *Where the Wild Things Are* is a marvelously rich fantasy of a little boy's escape into the world of monsters and make-believe. When Max was sent to bed without dinner, his lively imagination helped him escape his plight by creating a new world where he could be king of the beasts.

Stern, Lois W., *Wow! Am I Lucky! Personalized Stories, Inc. [dba Kidstories Creations] 1995, 1999. Available at: http://www.kidstories.com*
These personalized children's books and poems have been authored with the same passion as the Caldecott winners described above. The genre of personalized stories and poems has been elevated to a new level with the introduction of PHOTO PERSONALIZATION (child's photograph actually printed onto text pages) as well as some refreshing new personalized details about each child.)